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ABSTRACT

Preservice teachers enrolled in a reading methods course at a large university in the southwestern United States engage in a multicultural project which requires collaborative research. Groups are formed at the beginning of the semester, and either choose or are assigned a specific culture to research. Students then investigate the history and contributions of that culture. When the students have become knowledgeable about their chosen culture they begin investigating children's literature for the purpose of locating books which accurately and sensitively represent information about that particular culture. Groups develop a literature unit and organize class presentations to share their findings. The best literature units are then compiled into book form and made available for purchase at a local copy store. This project appears to promote cultural understanding and awareness through immersing university students in: (1) collaborative research; (2) investigation of quality children's literature and expository resources; and (3) multicultural information provided by classmates. Participants express an understanding of the power of education as a tool for promoting cultural understanding and sensitivity. (Author)

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PROMOTING MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE INVESTIGATION OF QUALITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

Preservice teachers enrolled in a reading methods course at a large university in the southwestern United States engage in a multicultural project which requires collaborative research. Groups are formed at the beginning of the semester, and either choose or are assigned a specific culture to research. Students then investigate the history and contributions of that culture. When the students have become knowledgeable about their chosen culture they begin investigating children's literature for the purpose of locating books which accurately and sensitively represent information about that particular culture.

Groups develop a literature unit and organize class presentations in order to share their findings. The best literature units are then compiled into book form and made available for purchase at a local copy store.

This project appears to promote cultural understanding and awareness through immersing university students in; a) collaborative research, b) investigation of quality children's literature and expository resources, and c) multicultural information provided by classmates. Participants express an understanding of the power of education as a tool for promoting cultural understanding and sensitivity.

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"Children's literature allows the reader to become absorbed in the lives and lifestyles of the characters in a natural way, rather than simply being told facts about other countries and cultures."

Donna, preservice teacher

Multicultural understanding involves seeking truth about the history, traditions, values, practices, and contributions made by different cultures for the purpose of helping individuals develop positive attitudes toward all cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Learning about one's own culture enables individuals to develop a stronger sense of identity and personal pride. Sharing accurate information about one's heritage is an empowering experience (Hittleman, 1978). In writing of her life in Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchu (Winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize) says:

> *"I believe that as we understand more about the cultural diversity of people, we value more what we have, not because it's unique, but because it's something we own, something that identifies us with our roots." (Menchu, 1984).*

Seeking truth about different cultures broadens student perspectives and facilitates expansion of cultural consciousness (Norton, 1991). Collaborative research enables participating individuals to develop positive attitudes toward cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious groups which differ from their own.

> *"I will admit that my definition of "different" carried some negative connotations. Now I see "different" as just that: Different--neither better nor worse."*
>
> *Carol, preservice teacher*

The United States population reflects increasing cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. The large number of immigrants and foreign workers who live and work in our country have altered the demographic and cultural flavor of our society (Walker-Dalhouse, 1992).

The growing number of people of color in our society and schools constitutes a demographic imperative which must be heard and responded to by educators (Hansen-Krening, 1992). The 1990 census indicated that one of every 4 Americans was a person of color. By the turn of the century one of every three individuals will be of color, and it has been estimated that nearly half of the nation's students will be of color by the year 2020. This trend is already apparent in some states (California, Florida, and Texas), where minority populations are rapidly approaching a numeric majority.

PURPOSE

This multicultural project was designed to provide preservice teachers with background information and practical techniques for promoting multicultural understanding through classroom investigation of quality children's literature. Participants become familiar with culturally sensitive literature, and classroom activities which support and develop multicultural understanding.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Preservice teachers enrolled in a reading methods course at a large university in the southwestern United States are required to engage in a multicultural project which requires collaborative research. Groups are formed at the beginning of the semester, and either choose or are assigned a specific culture to research (Some of the cultures which have been researched are: African, African American, Chinese, Deaf, French, German, Hawaiian, Hungarian, Irish, Japanese, Jewish, Mexican, Mexican American; Native American, and Saudi Arabian). Students then investigate the history and contributions of that culture. When the students have become knowledgeable about their chosen culture they begin investigating children's literature for the purpose of locating books which accurately and sensitively represent information about that particular culture. Groups are directed to develop a literature unit which will contain:

a) background information about the culture;

b) a list of children's literature which accurately reflects aspects of that culture; and

c) recommended resources and classroom activities which will promote understanding of their assigned culture.

The groups organize class presentations in order to share their findings with other class members. The best literature units are then compiled into book form and made available for purchase at a local copy store.

Important Reading and Study Skills Utilized

Through participation in multicultural literature groups the following reading and study skills are practiced:

1. Identifying resources and locating pertinent cultural information.
2. Researching and evaluating expository and narrative text for a specific purpose(s).
3. Organizing identified resource information and sharing the data with group members.
4. Comparing, contrasting, and evaluating expository and narrative text for cultural accuracy.
5. Utilizing knowledge gained from research for the purpose of recommending works of culturally authentic literature.

Anticipated Benefits

It was anticipated that participants in the multicultural projects would:

a) Become aware of and face personal prejudices.

b) Experience an opportunity to collaborate for professional purposes.

c) Read and evaluate a large quantity of children's literature and educational resources.

d) Improve writing skills through participation in the writing process.

e) Actively search for books written by authors and illustrators who authentically portray cultural experiences (thereby avoiding misrepresentation and stereotypes).

f) Experience the challenge, excitement and value of research.

g) Learn methods of teaching children to appreciate and respect the cultural diversity of their own heritage and also the heritage of others.

Unanticipated Benefits

University students are given an opportunity to respond to their personal experience in the multicultural groups. Unanticipated benefits which have resulted from the multicultural research projects are:

1. A number of preservice teachers have developed the awareness that they had been narrow minded.

> *"The presentations cleared up stereotypes. It seems silly to be a senior in college and still have stereotypes, but I did. I was a little embarrassed about them, but after talking with other group members I realized that I was not the only one with silly stereotypes. I get so wrapped up with everyday worries that I do not read as much as I should. I tend to see things in black and white because I am so rushed!"*
>
> *Randi, preservice teacher*

2. Through this experience, many participants gained knowledge about their own culture which became a source of pride and identity.

> *"I could not help but feel proud of my background and hopefully it showed in my oral presentation. As the other groups presented, I could see and hear the pride and positive attitudes which they projected. This not only made the presentations more entertaining, but also more interesting."*
>
> *Jesse, Preservice Teacher*

3. University students developed a newfound appreciation for the research skills and talent of their classmates .

> *"I was amazed at how much I learned from my classmates. Through their presentations I felt immersed in the various cultures. The more exposure one has, the less foreign other nationalities and races seem. This was a most valuable learning experience. "*
>
> *David, preservice teacher*

FINDINGS

Preservice teachers participating in this multicultural project have indicated that this experience has enabled them to understand that prejudice arises from lack of knowledge regarding other cultures and peoples. The following university student comment is reflective of remarks concerning prejudice.

"I am now aware that I did have stereotypes of some cultures, but I am working hard to overcome those ideas. "

Cheri, Preservice Teacher

"Most prejudiced people are that way not because they are innately hateful, but because of either the way they were raised or as the result of a bad experience. The only way to dispose of stereotypes picked up along the way is to foster a true understanding of various cultures and races, which in turn leads to respect for all people. "

Brandy, Preservice Teacher

Participants also begin to understand the power that they possess as educators to "make a difference" by demonstrating respect for all cultures and the heritage of children represented in their classrooms.

"As a future teacher, I feel the most important quality I can develop in my students is self-confidence. This includes having pride in one's own heritage and respect for that of others. I think that a child who is self-confident is less likely to develop prejudiced attitudes and take part in violence toward others.

Understanding of other cultures can be fostered

through literature, which crosses the boundaries of time and culture. Through literature, children perceive the universal aspects of humanity emotions, needs, desires, etc. "

Kathryn , Preservice Teacher

"I have learned that there exists a far greater lack of understanding than I had ever anticipated. I have dealt with my anger and defensiveness, acknowledged my emotional involvement, and determined that rationality and education are the better solutions."

Donna, Preservice Teacher

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